



## An Analysis on *Runaway* from Perspective of Cognitive Dissonance

Ting Wang<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Inner Mongolia Honder College of Arts and Sciences, Hohhot City, China

<sup>2</sup>Philippine Christian University Center for International Education, Manila City, the Philippines

\*Correspondence: [wangting4586654@163.com](mailto:wangting4586654@163.com)

**Abstract:** When a person's behavior conflicts with the existing cognition, people will change their cognition or behavior to regain consistency and achieve psychological balance. This process is behavioral rationalization. But the ideas produced are not necessarily rational to maintain self-esteem by people. It is the manifestation of the cognitive dissonance theory which has been widely used in the study of social psychology. The short story *Runaway* of Alice Munro has great research significance on the protagonist's inconsistency between attitudes and behaviors. This paper analyzes the essential reasons for Carla's two times of escape to illustrate the mental conflict and identity exploration process. Besides, it offers strategies for dissonance relief through self-justification, attribution, self-efficacy, and consistency for middle-aged women who suffered from mind dissonance.

**Keywords:** Cognitive Dissonance, *Runaway*, Strategies of Dissonance Relieving

### I. Introduction

Alice Munro, a Canadian female writer, is known as the "Master of Contemporary Short Stories", who has written more than 100 short stories. Alice Munro was born in Ottawa, Canada in 1931. She started to write novels at an early age and spent most of her time in this quiet city. On October 10, 2013, the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences awarded Munro the Nobel Prize in Literature. Munro has created and published one novel which similar to a collection of stories, more than 100 short stories, most of which are included in 14 short story collections until now. As early as 1950, she began to write and publish her first short story, "*The Dimension of a Shadow*". She become famous in 1968, when "*Happy Shadow Dance*" was well received by readers and attention. "*Who Do You Think You Are*" won the Governor General's Award again in 1978. "*The Progress of Love*" won The Governor General's Award for the third time in 1986. And then "*The Love of a Good Woman*" (1998) and "*Runaway*" (2004) won the Giller Prize in Canada and the third Man Booker International Award in 2009. In addition to the novels mentioned above, she also wrote: "*Lives of Girls and Women* (1971)" and "*Something I Have Been Meaning to Tell You*" (1974), "*The Moons of Jupiter*"(1982), "*Open Secrets*"(1994), "*Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*"(2001), "*No Love Lost*"(2003), "*Vintage Munro*" (2004), "*View from Castle Rock*", (2006), "*Too Much Happiness*"(2009) and "*Dear Life*"(2012).

Alice Munro tells stories about women in delicate and simple words. "*Runaway*" is a short story in a collection, published in 2004. "*Runaway*," the first story in Alice Munro's collection of the same title, concerns two runaways: Carla chose to leave home in the cold fall morning with a man who was the architect of life in a rusted truck; Carla was inspired by her abusive husband to run away from parents; Sylvia, as the neighbor and employer of her, who encourages Carla to escape from emotion abuse from her husband. The first escape succeeds with the changes in behaviors to conform to the ideas. The despising of the family made her hard to live with them again. So she decided to leave at the point of Clark showing up. Although the balance of ideas and behaviors was achieved, the second escape indicated that it was an irrational decision made by Carla about the first escape. The first runaway led Carla into an abyss of despair.

With some money and a temporary lodging offered by Sylvia, Carla got on the bus with unease and excitement which was the second escaping. However, she called Clark and begged for him to pick her up at depot while the bus was near Toronto. Why Carla changed her mind and decided to come back to the place of suffering? Carla once told Sylvia that the only thing that stopped her from leaving was the money. While on the way to escaping, she was discouraged by the unknown world and dependence on Clark. Consequently, her second runaway failed. Most research leans toward concluding the happy ending of



Carla and Clark because of the self-consciousness of Carla's return. But can Carla really live happily afterward and pretend nothing happened? Carla's behavior, coming back home, conflicts with the existing cognition that home is full of suffering. So she changed her cognition that the outside world is scary and unfamiliar and she can not live without Clark. In this way, consistency is regained between the attitudes and behaviors. But the ideas produced are not necessarily rational to maintain self-esteem by people. Carla was scared of the outside world because she was not a person with extensive self-efficacy but with mental conflict and uncertain self-identity. Some psychological problems, such as fear and anxiety, stem from ambivalence about something —Carla should leave Clark, but she is afraid to approach the outside world. The core of cognitive dissonance is a state of tension where people relieve dissonance through adjusting cognition. This paper analyzes the essential reasons for Carla's two times of escape to illustrate the mental conflict and identity exploration process. Besides, it offers strategies for dissonance relief through self-justification, attribution, self-efficacy, and consistency for middle-aged women who suffered from mind dissonance.

## II. Literature Review

Critical studies relevant to Munro started in the 1980s. Munro was concerned with all matters of women. She is good at describing women's lives and experiences to show the inner world from the female perspective. H. Dallis was the first scholar to focus on the female consciousness in Munro's works. Typical books like *Dance of the Sexes: Art and Gender in the Fiction of Alice Munro* by Beverly J. Roporich<sup>[2]</sup> and *Dance of the sexes: art and gender in the fiction of Alice Munro* by Rasporich, B. J.<sup>[5]</sup> These researchers study Munro's works from a feminist perspective and explore the female identity, female consciousness, and the influence of female consciousness on her creation. Due to the differences between Munro's narrative techniques and traditional literature, the study of her narration is very different from traditional literature, so narratology is one of the research focuses currently. *The Other Country: Patterns in the Writing of Alice Munro* by Carscallen James<sup>[3]</sup> and *Probable Fictions: Alice Munro's Narrative Acts* by MacKendrick, Louis K.(ed.) are closely concerned with narratology<sup>[7]</sup>. Robert Thacker states in *Clear Jelly: Alice Munro's Narrative Dialectics* that Munro employs double perspective and flashback in her fiction and points out that the flashback is the catalyst of the artistic charm of her fiction<sup>[8]</sup>. Before Munro won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2013, there is only a translation edition of her collection of stories—*Runaway* translated by Li Wenjun in 2009 in China. After winning the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2013, a “Munro fever” emerged in the domestic literary circle. Since then, there are a large number of translations of Munro's work which provide an extensive platform for exchanging academically. By searching the CNKI databases, there are fifteen master's theses and journals related to feminism. Zhao Huizhen reviews the women's living conditions and the efforts of providing the possibility for the construction of female images and Alice Munro<sup>[9]</sup>. Gong Ping reveals the patriarchal bias toward the women at that time and the women's self-identity searching<sup>[4]</sup>. Besides, structuralism, symbolism, theme, existentialism, stylistics, gothic, ecofeminism, narratology, and textual analysis are also focal points in the academic research circle. In contrast to the foreign research on Munro's works, domestic research begins late and is still in its early phase. There is no research on Munro's novel from a social psychology point of view. The thesis tends to analyze *Runaway* from the angle of cognitive dissonance.

## III. Cognitive Dissonance

Cognitive dissonance refers to a situation involving conflicting attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors. This produces a feeling of mental discomfort leading to an alteration in one of the attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors to reduce the discomfort and restore balance. Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory suggests that “people have an inner drive to hold all their attitudes and behavior in harmony and avoid disharmony.”<sup>[6]</sup> When an inconsistency between attitudes or behaviors occurs, something must change to eliminate the dissonance<sup>[5]</sup>.

Social psychological researchers have to consider the social belonging of man as a social animal. The connection between the individual and the surrounding people and the communication and sharing with others can enlarge the individual's sense of acceptance, belonging, and social value. From a psychological perspective, people experience loneliness when they lack positive and friendly relationships with others. However, individuals with good social networks reported higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction.

The core idea of cognitive dissonance is that individuals have an instinctive desire to keep their internal attitudes consistent with their external behaviors. When individuals engage in anti-attitudinal behaviors that threaten their self-concept, the body alleviates and reduces cognitive emotional stress through self-regulation and matching. The degree of cognitive dissonance is determined by The importance of the individual's self-cognition attitude. The clearer the self-cognition attitude, the more emotional pressure brought by anti-attitude behavior. There is no close connection between the degree of cognitive dissonance and an individual's adjustment behavior to balance cognitive dissonance. Notice that As long as an individual has cognitive dissonance, the individual is bound to make adjustment behaviors to alleviate dissonance.

## IV. The Reasons for Escaping

### 4.1 Mental Conflict

Life is filled with decisions, and decisions (as a general rule) arouse dissonance. Clark is an equestrian teacher who left home at an early age. He dropped out during the middle school period. That is the man came into Carla's heart with a sense of freedom she yearned for in her fantasy. Clark, who grew up freely. Most importantly, he was not a good husband or even a "good man" during the marriage. Being rude, provocative, and in debt are the marks of Clark. Therefore Carla has to endure his temper while struggling to get by doing farm work she has never done before. The pent-up emotions were triggered while Carla was cleaning the house of a neighbor, Mrs. Jamieson. After listening to Carla's account of her disappointing husband, Mrs. Jamieson chose to help Carla "escape". It is the second escape from her "desperate" life. The tragic relationship between them was a misunderstanding of love. It is the owning of Clark that Carla did not have that brought them together. Specifically, Carla was attracted to him for the first time. In the general love story, love is the basis. Even if problems happened, there was the possibility to continue to improve the relationship between couples. As Carla's husband, Clark is too disappointing to shoulder the responsibility because of his hopelessness. It can be seen when Carla told him about Mr. Jamieson. The picture that Carla had tried to suppress was that it was all in Carla's imagination. She only had seen the poet from a distance through a crack in the door.<sup>[1]</sup> The poet had died some time ago, and his wife, Mrs. Jamieson, had just returned from a trip. Clark wanted to take advantage of the fact even if it didn't exist. To get Carla to ask for money from Mrs. Jamieson about the request from Mr. Jamieson: the sort of intellectual family would like to use the money for decency's sake. The man had not thought from Carla's point of view but pushed her into a situation that ruined her reputation. Carla began to break down after she mentioned Flora, a sheep. She said she was miserable and she could not stand her husband any longer. It also proves that Flora is a symbol. Carla's representation of this symbol is undoubtedly her internal projection of marriage. Finally, Carla puts on Sylvia's clothes and money to find Sylvia's friends in Toronto. On the bus, she thought that she was about to face a new life alone, dealing with something new to her. She suddenly realized that she could not fit into the future world. But when the flight is over, and she is on her own. Carla was concerned about what will she put in his place. What else and who else could be such a clear-cut challenge?" Carla couldn't imagine how she would get on a subway or a tram and take care of a horse. In Carla's mind, basic interpersonal communication seems a big challenge for her like talking to people she didn't know and spending her days surrounded by people who weren't Clark. She could not live without her husband. The fast change of mind for Carla is a typical dissonance and she was so assured when she accepted the help from Sylvia that she couldn't stand him anymore.

Just like the description from the novel: "He was mad at her all the time. He acted as if he hated her. There was nothing she could do right, there was nothing she could say. Living with him was driving her crazy. Sometimes she thought she already was crazy. Sometimes she thought he was."<sup>[1]</sup>

If people's behavior conflicts with their self-concept, they may experience dissonance, meaning that the occurrence of dissonance mainly depends on people's self-concept. Dissonance theory also implies the assumption that most individuals have a positive self-concept and experience dissonance when their behavior is inconsistent with that positive so that it is perceived as incompetent or immoral. According to self-consistency theory, people with different self-esteem levels have different degrees of dissonance, and people with high self-esteem experience more dissonance than those with low self-esteem. People need to maintain self-integration and they are good enough to adapt to society in general. If this positive self-image is threatened, people will experience dissonance. People with high self-esteem experience less dissonance than people with low self-esteem because their self-concepts are more positive and more conducive to self-affirmation. Carla is such a person who relies on her husband too much that she loses basic living skills like being afraid of talking to strangers or unfit for the new environment. Such low self-esteem women who live an average life with a man and cut their relationship with family easily feel dissonant. Choosing to leave a man who ill-treated her mentally or pursue a new life with the help of a friend was a conflict in Carla's mind. As a result, she betrayed herself to yield to reality.

#### **4.2 Identity Exploration**

For several centuries, countless women have taken the road of resisting the patriarchy while pursuing freedom, equality, and happiness. However, the role of women in society and real life is still affected profoundly by the social culture and male-centered society at the time. The female is also full of doubts about the female role while awakening. The heroines of *Runaway* hide their self-identity in the psychological changes of daily life. This quiet life is filled with resistance to their own identity and self-position.

The figure of Carla in the novel is described as a boy - "bare-legged", "bare-armed" and standing at the top of a ladder. Even the gift given by Sylvia is a teenager holding the reins which symbolized Carla. The female image with masculinity made women cannot determine their own female identity. She tries to make herself attractive and socially identifiable through her masculinity, but this contradicts Carla's dependence on Clark as "the designer of future life". Even though she is masculine, Carla still cannot deny her female identity. On the bus to Toronto, her idea of dependence on Clark confirms her femininity. As a wife in the marriage, she was eager to receive care from her husband, but the reality is Clark did not understand how to maintain the relationship. The dissonance of self-identity exists throughout the whole marriage. Carla couldn't bear her ignorance and madness from Clark and thought about escaping can be a good choice. While the moment she got closed to the

end, she stayed back and realized that the absence of Clark is miserable. So she gave up leaving but come back to the home that she thought was unbearable before. This can not be called a smart choice because she had no clear identity of herself. Munro's novels stand from the female angle and overlook the complex relations and subtle changes of women in the process of dealing with others male (husband, father, or male relatives) and female (mother, female children, or female relatives). The complex collision between people's feelings and ideas is like the network of the current society. While dealing with a delicate relationship, anxiety and helplessness feelings can occur all the time. Women have always had the inner strength to keep themselves alive. Young women experience anxiety and helplessness. Elder women go through pain and strife. Carla as a young woman has not reflected on her past life but followed her instinct and present feelings. So she was confused and couldn't decide in the long run.

## **V. Strategies of Dissonance Relieving**

### **5.1 Less self-justification**

A man is more like a protective animal and he is good at defending themselves. For example, when people don't get what they want or fail to do something, they find some excuses to justify. This is called a "defense mechanism" to prevent discomfort or unhappiness. When people make mistakes, they will make excuses for their mistakes or failures, such as "bad luck", "bad weather", "not helpful", etc. This is the unconscious concealment of the true reasons for failure, so they can refuse to admit it. Reverse behavior usually happened when people are indifferent to the person they like but show a warm welcome to the person they dislike. It takes the opposite behavior to their consciousness. When failing in doing things, people tend to find the most appropriate reason to relieve the pressures. "It's normal that I can't do it because it's so difficult", or "I can't do it well because I'm sick." Carla regretted leaving Clark because of the cognitive dissonance. So she had to find an appropriate excuse for coming back. She kept strengthening the feeling that she can not live without Clark even the basic skills of communication. The self-persuasion worked and she got off the bus in the end. If less-self-justification of Carla made and went for a new life in Toronto, she would live with fewer worries about her husband's attitude towards her. An independent woman she would be because she grew up in a middle-class family even though with a stepfather. The characteristics of Carla are man-like, so all that is needed is an environment and time for her to accustomed. No one can assure her that life after she comes back to him can be different, the only change is Carla's mind rather than the Clark's. The short-term care from him is probably the way of holding Carla to stay with him.

### **5.2 Proper attribution**

Seligman developed a part of Weine's attribution theory-Acquired Helplessness Attribution Theory. He showed that the outcome (or event) of having pessimistic behavior does not necessarily make a person helpless. But only when emotion, motivation, and cognition are absent, meaning that the individual feels that it is impossible to change or control the situation, feelings of helplessness emerge. Carla kept a low emotion in marriage. She was terrified of Clark's ignorance and bad temper. The depression and disappointment occupied her so much that she couldn't bear it any longer. This is the absence of positive emotion. Stubborn negative habit cultivates and basic ability to identify losses in such a situation. When a person attributes his difficulties, problems, or failures to internal, stable, and uncontrollable factors, he will often feel guilty, depressed, and inferior when he is in trouble. People's motivation to learn will be greatly weakened or even give up efforts. Seligman calls this "Learned Helplessness" and points out that it is rooted in an individual's attribution style.

Only attribute the success to subjective efforts with fewer complaints about the environment can Learned Helplessness be avoided. Carla analyzes problems from a negative point of view. The unknown future for her is like a maze and she is afraid of loneliness. So she attributed the giving up of escape to dependence on Clark which is not exact. One's happiness relies on exploration and pursuing rather than stepping back.

### **5.3 Extensive self-efficacy**

Self-efficacy as an important part of Social Cognition Theory refers to the belief in how confident people are capable or how confident they can perform a particular task. Self-efficacy is a subjective evaluation that emphasizes the individual personal experience and feelings. It is the thinking process of an individual against himself. Learners with positive self-efficacy can focus their attention more effectively on the problems and difficulties that need to be solved, to avoid the negative effects caused by tension and anxiety.

People with high self-efficacy are willing to take on bigger challenges. Everyone has an expectation in mind that determines their goals. They are good at thinking big, which fully embodies the principle of with great power comes great responsibility. A person with high self-efficacy trusts his judgment. When his ideas do not conform to tradition, he stands his ground. or when many people oppose them and do not easily conform to others.

What is absent from Carla is obsessing a growth mindset and belief in potential. True confidence comes not only from past successes but also from a belief in human potential. The most important psychological foundation for building self-confidence is a growth mindset. If Carla was confident enough in her ability to live in a new environment, what waited for her in the future is a new world without worries about her husband's ignorance and bad temper. Real and stable confidence is built on the understanding and grasp of the law of the development of things.

#### 5.4 Consistent attitude and behavior.

Cognitive dissonance is the inconsistency between internal attitudes and external behaviors, meaning an internal condition with negative and unpleasant emotions. When people have to do something he doesn't want to do, they undertake pressure. At this point, he probably looks for sufficient reasons to justify his behavior that are inconsistent with his attitude. One may find external reasons are sufficient to support his behavior or he has no such external reasons or insufficient reasons to relieve his inner pressure. Psychologists have found that in the former case, the pressure born by the individual is counteracted by external reasons and the individual's attitude towards inconsistent behavior will not change. While his attitude toward inconsistent behavior will change if the pressure has nowhere to release. This could be interpreted as a protective mechanism that people have evolved. A woman like Carla in the novel, who experienced the unhappy family of origin and then eloped with a man to pursue the imaginary marriage, had no road back. Huge pressures push her to escape again when conflicts outbreak and out of her bearing. At first, his ignorance and indifference from Clark made her feel desperate and unbearable. As a result, she decided to leave him without notice. While the behavior of returning was inconsistent with the decision of estrangement, the dissonance occurred. To balance the inconsistency, Carla used external reasons —an unfamiliar city is hard to survive and loneliness is unbearable—to persuade herself to dispel runaway. It is a way to keep herself safe and adjust the cognitive dissonance by changing the mind to be compatible with the behaviors. But in Carla's case, adding a new cognition, physical torture is much better than the spiral one and I can earn my bread through hardworking at least, is doing better for a woman like her. Emotional abuse is not that simple to resolve only by one side's compromise. Inconsistency between attitude and behavior happens whenever people face pressures and challenges. Keep the balance and consistency maintain psychological harmony and improve communication skills.

#### VI. Conclusion

Munro's characters in the novel don't reflect strong reactions to events. So, specifically for her male characters, she has mastered the essence of ordinary people. While her female characters are more complex with different emotions. Ms. Munro's pithy and lucidity of language give her novels a "striking precision". Munro's account reveals the ambiguous ambiguities of life: like "irony and seriousness go hand in hand" and "a sharp and happy tone of fury". Munro juxtaposes the wonderful with the ordinary and interweaves them with each other directly and effortlessly so that her works are filled with energy and vitality. *Runaway* of Munro inspects two escapes of Carla and presents the emotional and mental sufferings in the marriage. It can be seen as the growth in the relationship between husband and wife, mother and daughter, or even women themselves. By analyzing the reasons for Carla's escaping, mental conflict is the obvious reason that she regretted leaving Clark without reflecting on the sufferings before. As time went by, Carla's identity from daughter to wife went through a change, she has no clear idea of what an independent woman should equip with. No clear identity of herself made her have no courage to step outside. The enlightenment for such cognitive dissonance is to take less self-justification. Excuses stop one's step to progress. Secondly, proper attribution is important for character formation. Lastly, extensive self-efficacy avoids over-dependence and temptation. Carla in the *Runaway* shows the middle women's suffering from life and society. Giving in is not always an effective solution in every situation. Only if a strong heart and clear mind help women hug the bright future.

#### REFERENCES

- [1]. Alice, Munro (2006). *Runaway*. London: Vintage Books.
- [2]. Beverly J. Rasporich (1990). *Dance of The Sexes: Art and Gender in the Fiction of Alice Munro*. Winnipeg: The University of Albert Press.
- [3]. Carscallen, James (1993). *The Other Country: Patterns in the Writing of Alice Munro*. Toronto: ECW Press.
- [4]. Gong Ping. (2009). *The Influence of Identity on Alice Munro's Literary Creation*. Changchun: Jilin University.
- [5]. G.G.Anthor & L.R.David (1978) . The development of the theory of cognitive dissonance. *Psychological Review*. 85 (1) : 53-57.
- [6]. Leon Festinger. (1957). *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. California: Stanford University Press.
- [7]. MacKendrick, Louis K.(ed.). (1983). *Probable Fictions: Alice Munro's Narrative Acts*. Toronto: ECW Press.
- [8]. Robert, Thacker.(1983) *Clear Jelly: Alice Munro's Narrative Dialectics*. Toronto: ECW Press.
- [9]. Zhao Huizhen. (2002). Study on Canadian Female Writer Alice Munro and the Female Images in Her Works. *Journal of Lanzhou University*. (6) : 115-120.